



The Fear Factor

Fear is a feeling that too often runs our lives. Terrorism, war, an uncertain economy – it seems like there's more than ever to be worried about or afraid of. Fear, in any form, can keep us from living our lives to the fullest. The good news is that while fear is a natural reaction and can't be eliminated, it can be controlled – rather than it controlling you.

Fear Is Natural

The first thing to remember is that fear is a natural part of life. Every emotion has a positive use – even the ones we'd prefer not to experience – and so does fear, which arises from our natural instinct for self-preservation.

When we're frightened, we automatically experience a "fight or flight" impulse to get us out of a harmful situation. When the event is over, our bodies are supposed to go back to normal. But it doesn't always work that way – often because in our modern lives we can't take immediate action to resolve the situation. We perpetuate the fear and stress by worrying about the event or the consequences that followed. We've all had bad experiences that make us play out a million different scenarios in our minds, and when we do, we increase our stress and become even more consumed by fear.

Turn Fear to Your Advantage

The first step in making fear an ally is recognizing that in modern life the "fight or flight" instinct is often counterproductive. Instead, we need a clear head and an understanding of the basis for the fear. As odd as it sounds, we need detachment (even if only for a moment) in order to gain clarity.

Since most of the time we are not in imminent danger, taking a deep breath and asking ourselves some simple questions can add a dose of reality to the fear. For example, ask yourself, "Why do I feel afraid?" "Do these feelings have a basis in reality?" or "How can I get a better, more objective picture of the situation and my feelings?"

Next, take action. Don't wait until you've analyzed every possible scenario – if you're facing a crisis, it's important to move quickly and gather some momentum for change. Taking action actually reduces fear because it reinforces the belief that we can cope with the situation: that we can handle the crisis and overcome the fear. That momentum brings confidence and creates new opportunities.

In its most positive form, fear can drive us – it can be used to challenge ourselves physically and emotionally, professionally or personally. Once we control our fear (rather than the other way around) it becomes a huge catalyst for positive change.

Fear arises as a response to a major crisis in our lives, perhaps an accident, a traumatic illness or a national disaster like September 11. Such crises are often turning points, and our responses become moments of truth. Do we let the crisis continue, or do we triumph over it?

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